

Those "Beautiful" Boas

by Roy W. Rings BU 336

There are about a dozen genera of snakes containing 60 species in the Subfamily Boinae of the Family Boidae. Boas occur in both the New and Old World, chiefly in warm regions. These reptiles vary in length from about eight inches to more than 25 feet and have stout bodies and comparatively short tails. Most of these snakes are terrestrial or semiaquatic but some are arboreal. The majority have disruptive patterns, such as blotches and diamonds on their brown, green or yellowish bodies. The young are born alive inside the chorion in most species. Boas seize their prey by rapid strikes and then kill by constricting. Every time their prey exhales they tighten their coils until the victims can no longer inhale and suffocation ensues. The larger boas are so powerful that they can stop the blood from circulating during constriction.

The common and scientific names of the Boa Constrictor are unusual since they are identical – Boa Constrictor, *Boa constrictor*. It occupies a variety of habitats from coastal northern Mexico and the Lesser Antilles to Argentina. This boa is seldom more than 11 feet long and the record length is 18.2 feet. This species has been shown on postage stamps of Mexico (Scott 1326) shown at the left and Ecuador (Scott 1686c).



My first encounter with a Boa Constrictor occurred in 1939 when I was a graduate teaching assistant in Zoology at Ohio State University. A four foot Boa Constrictor was used to demonstrate the appearance and behavior of snakes to students and purportedly came into Columbus, Ohio on stalks of bananas from Central America. I had no problems in getting the boa out of its cage and into the laboratory however another teaching assistant did. He apparently seized the boa by the tail and threw it over his shoulder. On his way to the laboratory some foolish student teased the snake and found out that they strike very fast and have very sharp teeth. As a result he had to have several stitches taken in his hand to repair the snake's bite. I saw my first

wild boas in southwestern Mexico as road kills on the back roads from Guadalajara to Colima during a butterfly collecting expedition in 1982. In 1983 I joined a group of 60 butterfly collectors in central Venezuela and at one point I heard my name called "Roy, do you want to see a snake?" I hurried to the presumed spot and found our guide, Raphael, a technician from a nearby biological station, holding a small Boa Constrictor. He had rescued it from a road crew member who was about to kill it. I asked if I could have my picture taken with the boa around my neck. I took the snake from him moving very slowly and handled the snake gently. After the photo was taken I returned the snake to Raphael. Holding the boa in his left hand he pointed out the sensory organs in the lip with his right forefinger. He moved his finger much too fast, attracting the snake's attention and causing it to strike. It sank its teeth into his forefinger and I could see tiny droplets of blood oozing from the wound. Wisely, he did not pull away but let the snake release his finger when it was ready. Pulling away would have caused more laceration since the boas sharp teeth curve backwards to aid in holding and swallowing their prey.



Several boas are arboreal and long-toothed for catching birds and one example is the striking Emerald Tree Boa (*Corallus caninus*) of tropical South America. The adult is green above, with white dorsal stripes and crossbars, and yellow below. This boa is shown on a Brazilian stamp (Scott 2317) at left. The magnificent Rainbow Boa (*Epicrates cenchria*) ranges from Costa Rica to Argentina and does not have an attractive pattern but is markedly iridescent. The brown, 18 inch Rubber Boa (*Charina bottae*) of western North America is the most northerly boa and is a burrowing species. It looks and feels rubbery. The Rosy Boa, *Lichanura trivirgata*, at 35 inches, ranges from southern California and Arizona into Mexico, usually has brown or pink stripes. The West Indies hosts ten species of Dwarf Boas in the genus *Tropidophis*. The Spotted Dwarf Boa, *Tropidophis paradalis*, may be seen on a 1984 stamp issue of Cuba (Scott 2519).
